



◆ HARTFORD STREET ZEN CENTER ◆

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"Mindfulness Is Not A Part-Time Job"

From A Lecture by Issan Dorsey-sensei at HSZC, August 1988

Someone said to me the other day, "Aren't you always working on something?" Yes, we're always working on something, but hopefully it's not up here in our heads, filled with words to obscure it. I was talking with my teacher in Santa Fe about the phrase, "coming to reside in your breath-mind," and working with that phrase; and how useful it is to me. I thought it was interesting that I'd never heard it before, and was just now beginning to work with it. Baker-roshi said to me, "You just heard it but you didn't just hear it. This has been with you since you first started practicing." It's a whole way of working with your mind—and I've been thinking a lot about that lately. Hopefully, you won't have to wait for twenty years before you begin to hear how to work with this thing called mind in zazen. Now people who come to practice immediately sit much easier than they did when I first began to sit at Sokoji Temple. I remember everybody sitting with their legs bent up. They'd sit for five minutes, then they'd lay down and moan. But now people come and it's like we already did that part for them. It's as if we have a shared body that has already gone through that preliminary stuff and people are already able to experience some aspect of zazen practice and how we practice together.

We have to be willing to explore and experiment. First we have to have a sense of humor and a willingness to explore and experiment with our lives and our uncomfortableness. We know that sometimes we can sit for a few minutes, or even a few days, but at some point it gets pretty uncomfortable; and it's uncomfortable for us not to invite our thoughts to tea, and to reside in our breath-mind. "Don't invite your thoughts to tea" is an expression of Suzuki-roshi's which I've always found useful. You know, these are just words, and we have to remember that every human concept is just delusion. Still, we use words and provisionally talk about our experience. Lately, I have been exploring this way of thinking with J.D. and I appreciate the opportunity to work with him. As you know, J.D. has dementia, the virus that is living in his brain. I'm thinking and working on it and talking with J.D. about it because the virus that is attacking so many of us now ends up being in the brain. So is there some way for us to experience that? I don't know yet. My question is: how to be with people who have dementia and how to experience the dementia that we all have now anyway? Mind is always creating confusion, joy and pain, like and don't like, and depression. But there is also a "background mind." This is what we have been talking about together.

Just before I came down to give this lecture I couldn't remember what I was supposed to do next to get dressed—I had to actually stop and think, "Oh, you have to put on your obi (belt)." I couldn't figure where to move, so I just stood in the middle of the room; and I finally remembered I had to put on my obi, so I could get dressed. Sometimes when I'm talking about uncomfortableness I talk about the five fears. One of the five fears is the fear of unusual states of mind. How do we come to have appreciation and respect for this fear and not just some resistance? So that we can enter our fear, allowing these new areas of uncomfortableness.

(continued on reverse)

When we can enter each of these new spaces, we can begin to look at truthfulness. "Why do we have to sit?" Tenshin-sensei once replied: there's no reason to sit. If you're completely sincere there's no reason to sit. I'm not completely sincere so I have to keep sitting to check. Even if we're involved with unskillful actions, the one quality we should strive for is truthfulness. Truthfulness takes a total commitment to see all aspects of ourselves and our unskillfulness. If we can embrace the totality of ourselves we can embrace the totality of others and of the world. Our tendency is to think about things before we do them. Even when we see a flower we say: "Oh, what a beautiful flower." "Beautiful flower" is extra. Just look at the flower with no trace.

"When we practice zazen our mind is calm and quite simple." Do you think that's true? Suzuki-roshi wrote, "But usually our mind is very busy and complicated and it is difficult to be concentrated on what we are doing." This is because when we act we think, and this thinking leaves some trace. Our activity is shadowed by some preconceived idea. The traces and notions make our mind very complicated. When we do something with a quite simple clear mind we have no shadows and our activity is strong and straightforward. So, even with zazen practice, it gets so complicated. We're dissecting every aspect of what's going on, reviewing and comparing. How do we keep it simple and clear and straightforward? How do we come to know this basic truth of practice and Buddhism? The teaching and the rules can and should be changed according to the situation and the people we're practicing with, but the secret of practice cannot be changed. It's always truth.

We teach ourselves and encourage ourselves by creating this space [the zendo] so that we can begin looking at our mind. "Don't invite your thoughts to tea." "Where is our breath-mind?" "How do you create background mind?" I used to say: allow this kind of mind, or allow it to arise. But now I'm saying: *create* background mind. This practice is simple: count your breaths, and don't invite your thoughts to tea. But, "don't invite your thoughts to tea" doesn't mean to get rid of thinking. That is discrimination. "Don't invite your thoughts to tea" is non-discrimination. So, there's no reason to get rid of the thoughts, but rather, to have some blank, non-interfering relationship with them. Don't make your mind blank, but rather, have some blank relationship with the thoughts. Begin to see the space behind and around the thoughts and shift the seat of your identity out of your thoughts and come to reside in your breath-mind. We develop our intention to reside in our breath-mind by first bringing our attention to "breath as mind" and then by shifting the seat of our identity from our thoughts to our breath-mind.

This all ties in with how we use this space, this laboratory. We should have a willingness to explore with our lives and this is our laboratory, right here—how we use the zendo and how we use what happens outside of the zendo. Mindfulness is not a part-time job.

The Garden

Twenty years ago a friend—who reads me well—gave me a simple placard for my Volkswagen van. It read, "In order to love others, I must first love myself." My friend also offered me her tattered copy of D.T. Suzuki's book, *Zen Buddhism*. I pored over that book knowing that "someday" I would practice zazen myself.

Now, twenty years later—beginning to love myself, beginning to let go of myself—another friend, Maria, has led me to the Hartford Street Zen Center. It took letting go of the closet and a family, letting go of alcoholism and—whip to the bone—the shock of a positive HIV test, to finally bring me to this austere and ordinary place.

Coming to the Hartford Street Zen Center I understand more clearly that my practice is, most of all, sitting simply in zazen. But then again, our little sangha, our Victorian house, our AIDS hospice, Maitri, and the pleasure of taking responsibility for creating and caring for a front yard garden, all enrich my life daily.